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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement presented by IPAS, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Statement

Ten years ago, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, nations adopted a Platform for Action that recognized the fundamental connection between human rights, reproductive rights, and sexual and reproductive health. According to the agreement, these rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so. Unfortunately, 120 million women who want to plan their families still do not have access to the means to do so. Many of these women, faced with an unwanted pregnancy, will resort to unsafe abortion.

Every year, close to 20 million women seek unsafe abortions; 68,000 of them die and 5 million more are temporarily or permanently disabled. It was recognized during the five-year review of the Platform for Action that unsafe abortions represent a grave public health problem as it is primarily the poorest and youngest who take the highest risk. In follow-up to the 1994 Cairo Programme of Action, nations were called on to ensure that women who have unwanted pregnancies should have ready access to reliable information and compassionate counselling. In circumstances where abortion is not against the law, such abortion should be safe. Further, nations where abortion is a crime were called on to consider reviewing laws containing punitive measures against women who have undergone illegal abortions.

Many members of the international community – governments, civil society organizations, and international agencies – have worked together to lay the foundation for more rapid progress in reducing the deaths and injuries caused by unsafe abortion. These include increased contraceptive usage and expanded post-abortion care programs, saving many women's lives. In addition, a number of countries have expanded legal indications for abortion, while technologies for induced abortions have also improved. We must also recognize the World Health Organization's released guidance for health systems on the provision of high-quality care for women who need induced abortions.

However, more needs to be done. In a clear violation of their rights to health and life, over 100 million women will experience the risks and trauma of an unsafe abortion during their lives unless they are enabled to avoid unwanted pregnancies. Many of these women are living in poverty or suffering from serious health conditions such as HIV/AIDS or malaria. Many are adolescents, survivors of sexual violence, refugees or displaced persons living in situations

characterized by violence and lack of access to adequate health services.

On this occasion as we review the Beijing Platform for Action, therefore, we call on all members of the international community – governments, civil society organizations, and international agencies – to join together in pursuing an active dialogue on abortion as a critical issue in women's reproductive health and rights and in supporting the actions required to translate the Beijing Platform for Action into reality.